DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 450 CS 209 645

AUTHOR Snodgrass, Mary Ellen
TITLE Literature in Translation.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (75th, Philadelphia, PA, November 22-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Awareness; *Language Styles; *Literature Appreciation; Metaphors; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Difficulties; Secondary Education; Social Change; *Social Differences; *Time Perspective; *Translation
IDENTIFIERS *Literature in Translation

ABSTRACT

An examination of literature in translation is vital to literary interpretation and, ultimately, essential to mutual understanding among peoples from different cultures. Teaching translations requires consideration of linguistic, social, and temporal areas. Translations require alterations in language since languages never translate precisely from one to another. Also, place names and people's names often have more meaning than can be conveyed in one simple designation. Another aspect of the linguistic difficulties in translation is metaphoric language that replaces abstract concepts with pictures. The classroom teacher can develop students' awareness of these problems by having students read Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" and ask them what translation problems the author might have faced when he took his play to China. Translations also require acceptance and understanding of social change, such as the change in women's roles. Other areas of social differences requiring compensation are the role of God or the supernatural and alterations of life necessities. Translations of ancient words must also navigate a passage of time between the event and the reader's time, and between the translator's time and the reader's time. A final consideration is the alteration of nations and governments since early times. By emphasizing these areas, teachers can alleviate the vast sense of separation students feel when trying to comprehend translated literature. (A bibliography of sources on translated literature is included.) (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary Ellen Snodgrass
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED267450

LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

Mary Ellen Snodgrass

An examination of literature in translation fits well under this year's theme--"Listerning to the Past, Speaking to the Present." I have chosen this topic for three reasons--it is a neglected topic, it is vital to literary interpretation, and ultimately it is essential to mutual understanding among the world's peoples. There are three areas of consideration in teaching translations--linguistic, social, and temporal, all of which are interrelated. An awareness of these three areas can sharpen the student's perception of ideas which originate in foreign tongues and help him to make the necessary allowances for the translator's problems.

I. Translations require alterations in language: languages never translate neatly, one to one, as in dog is canis, cat is felis, horse is equus, and cow is vacca, as unsophisticated students of language sometimes suppose. Idiomatic changes can require lengthy explanations. For example Aristotle's hamartia means "a missing of the mark in archery practice" but is translated today as "tragic flaw, frailty, a mistaken judgment of the protagonist." Critics still argue the ramifications of its meaning--an indication that translation is an ongoing process of evaluation and interpretation.

Likewise, place names and people's names often have more meaning than simple designation. In the Old Testament, Bethel translates "house of God" and Eden, "delight." The name of Adam, which means "man," is a multiphasic play on words with Adamah, which means "earth." Other Old Testament characters have significant names: Cain, the first murderer, is "spear;" Abram changes his name to Abraham, "father of a multitude;" Sarai becomes Sarah, "princess;" Isaac receives the unusual name "laughter" after the news of his conception provokes a laugh from his aged father; Naomi deliberately chooses Amara, "bitterness;" and Moses is named "out of the water." When Moses asks the identity of the voice from the burning bush, God replies "I am who I am," a form of the verb "to be" which is the

CS 209 645

Hebrew word Yahweh, the sacred designation of the deity with no name.

In an example from the New Testament Christ makes a play on the name Peter, which means "rock," when he states: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church," a phrase which became the Petrine Supremacy, the undergirding of all Catholic doctrine, and is inscribed in gold around the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome--in the Latin of St. Jerome's Vulgate, not the Aramaic of Christ.

Another aspect of the linguistic difficulties in translation is metaphoric language which replaces abstract concepts with pictures, as in the myth of Prometheus when the hero endangers his life by stealing "fire from heaven" in order to equip man with a soul. The ability to see "fire from heaven" as a mythic representation of soul may not come easily to literal-minded students. In each of these examples, an understanding of circumstances is necessary for full appreciation of the words.

The classroom teacher can develop students' awareness of these translation problems by trying this exercise: after students have read Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* ask them what translation problems the author might have faced when he took his play to China. Would Chinese translations of the characters' names--Willy Loman, Biff, Happy--capture their personalities? Would a translation of *Huckleberry Finn* be possible? How would a translator capture the dialect of Huck and Jim? (A discussion of the American-ness of Twain's writing might lead the students to greater appreciation of his work.)

II. Translations require acceptance and understanding of social change. For example, women's roles in society differed in the past: Penelope is not a free agent and must adopt a ruse to protect Odysseus's kingdom of Ithaca. In the Bible Ruth has fewer choices when she becomes a widow--her lifestyle is prescribed by a structured familial response to widowhood. In many examples from literature woman's point of view is discounted or omitted, as in the accounts of Guinevere's adultery with Lancelot, of Bathsheba's liaison with King David, of Helen's abduction by

Paris. Translation does not begin to capture the non-person status of woman in the ancient world.

A second area of social difference requiring compensation, particularly with ancient literature, is the role of God or the supernatural. For example, Aeneas's mother, the goddess Venus, makes regular visits to her son to direct his earthly future. Likewise, Odysseus depends on Juno for wisdom and advice when he wrests the power of Ithaca from the hands of Penelope's suitors. All dwellers of the ancient world--the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans--regularly consulted the gods through prophets, augurs, and oracles for answers to everyday problems, as illustrated in the stories of Paris, Hercules, Cassandra, Jason, and Julius Caesar. It is hard for the modern reader, however, to envision God as a living character and participant in a story.

A third aspect of social change is found in alterations of life necessities. In Ruth's time, hungry people gleaned their food from the fields of the rich; today she might be eligible for food stamps. The ancient guest codes obligated people to provide lodging for wanderers; today, impersonal agencies such as the Salvation Army offer shelters and hostels. In another example water and bathing at various times have had ritualistic meanings as well as hygienic worth--the simple word <u>water</u> takes on special meaning in desert land where its scarcity gives it significance far beyond current definitions of the word. Likewise, grazing needs determined the nomadic existence and outlook, as indicated by David's description of an idyllic life amid "green pastures" and "still waters." Translation, by itself, omits the importance of these differences.

Even the need for grieving found in ancient literature differs from modern emotional response: the marring of the face, applications of ashes and dust to the body, and the cutting of hair are drastic measures by current standards. In some instances, such as Aesop's animal stories, an author can escape these social differences in people by concentrating on

animal behavior and excluding the more changeable styles of human beings. For most translations, however, such an absence of social differences is not the rule.

III. Translations of ancient works must navigate a passage of time between the event and the reader's time, and between the translator's time and the reader's time, a separation which Richmond Lattimore terms "the noise of the world." Primitive lifestyles are more difficult to describe in modern terms. For example, David's language in Psalms emphasizes the plight of the lonely shepherd, a form of livelihood that is rare in developed areas of the world. Similarly, Homer's poetic imagination captures a fear of natural phenomena which modern sailors would scoff at. (Ernle Bradford's *Ulysses Found* justifies the reality in Homer's poetry by substituting names of real places and real dangers that ancient sailors feared and told tales about, such as Scylla and Charybdis, the Cyclopes, and the land of the Laestrygonians.) Moreover, translations of both David's Psalms and Homer's poetry need constant updating to lessen the effect of the translator's own milieu, as is evident in some eighteenth and nineteenth century translations of Homer. Overall, transporting the reader into a primitive setting is hindered by the amount of time which must be covered in the transition as well as by the amount of time that has passed since the translation was completed.

Another consideration for the translator is the alteration of nations and governments since early times. Nomadic peoples of Bible times did not follow a modern concept of <u>nation</u>. Likewise, kings in Odysseus's time were not all-powerful rulers of great lands. Similarly, people often lacked a concept of property lines or real estate, as George Catlin describes in his dealngs with the plains Indians of North America. Readers tend to perceive the past in ethnocentric terms--similar to their own perceptions of what is normal, but dressed up in old clothes and funny hats. The extreme variance in abstract concepts like <u>nation</u> and <u>ruler</u> over the centuries would require a history lesson or two for a more thorough

understanding to take place.

By emphasizing these three areas of importance--linguistic, social, and temporal, teachers can alleviate the vast sense of separation students feel when trying to comprehend translated literature. At the same time teachers can encourage a practical approach--such as the study of foreign language and some attempts at simple literary translation so that students might appreciate more fully the problems involved. An advanced student of foreign language may even be capable of perceiving translation as an art in itself, as is the case with Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and the King James Bible. When readers comprehend that reading a work in translation is not the same as reading the original, they reach a necessary phase in understanding--that they have only begun to know the author's meaning.

Mary Ellen Snodgrass

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Bernhard W. Understanding the Old Testament. Second Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Baugh, Albert C. A History of the English Language. Second Edition. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957.

Bouquet, A. C. Everyday Life in New Testament Times. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

Bradford, Ernle. Ulysses Found. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1963.

Brown, Dee. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970.

Chase, Mary Ellen. Life and Language In the Old Testament. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1955.

Dickinson, Patric. "Vergil and The Aeneid," The Aeneid. New York: The New American Library, 1961.

Flacelière, Robert. A Literary History of Greece. New York: New American Library Inc., 1962.

Godolphin, Francis R. B. "Introduction," The Latin Poets. New York: The Modern Library, 1949.

Holman, C. Hugh. A Handbook to Literature. Fourth Edition. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981.

Lattimore, Richmond. "Introduction," The Iliad. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

MacKendrick, Paul. "Roman Culture: An Essay," Classics in Translation. Volume II. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.

May, Herbert G. and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. The Oxford Annotated Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.

Richards, I. A. "Introduction," The Iliad. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950.

Shaw, T. E. (Colonel T. E. Lawrence). "Introduction," The Odyssey of Homer. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.